

Paper cuts in the digital age

Well, there's this - we know quite a bit more about America now. Or alternatively, we know less than ever.

That was the polarising effect from spending much longer watching TV coverage of the US election than can possibly be good for anyone.

It involved many hours of letting the febrile tones of American media people wash over in tide after tide of graphics, maps, absentee-in-person vote counts, provisional ballots, tabulation and men called Gloria.

It was America in the worst of times and the only-slightly-betterish of times, the latter appearing fleetingly in the eyes of masked election registrars reassuring us that while there might be uncertainty, damnit they were going to count it right, and the president was just plain wrong about fraud.

Three days and nights after poll day, nobody seemed to agree on anything, not even how many states had been won and certainly not what percentage of votes were counted.

American news channels held on for several days to a Biden lead of 253-214, but here our news media varied between that and 264-214.

As explanations emerged from a range of increasingly exhausted-looking commentators on NBC, ABC, CBS, MSNBC and Al Jazeera (CNN wanted money, and Fox only appeared briefly when Trump chose to speak live), it dawned on us just how ridiculously variable are the election procedures in each state.

You could also see early on why Trump wanted to declare victory on election night. Unlike in NZ where the rural booths are slow to report in, it's the opposite in the US, so early maps showed a lot of Trump blush-red.

Biden kept his cool and even looked statesmanlike for the first time as he urged supporters to stay calm and that the best was to come, in the form of Covid-induced mail-in votes that would be overwhelmingly Democrat.

He was right. By early Saturday morning NZ time when I turned on the TV that dominates the wall facing our bed (I've disclosed more than I should) Biden had knocked a 700,000 deficit in key state Pennsylvania into a small lead.

Overnight (ours) he had also gone ahead in Georgia, and was moving away in Nevada and Arizona. He was surely going to win.

Trump's team - but not the man himself - thought so, too, because a mysterious statement emerged about 8am our time that indicated in un-Tweet-like language the vote was lost but legal battles would continue. It had Trump's name under it, but the TV people doubted he wrote it.

One of the most interesting things about coverage was it centred almost entirely on American places we tend to notice only for mass shootings or climate change-induced disasters.

Most of the ones we're familiar with - New York, Los Angeles, Miami - were hardly mentioned. This was about cities and counties in Arizona, Wisconsin, Michigan,

Nevada, Georgia, Pennsylvania and North Carolina, all of which were suddenly prominent because they seemed to be the slowest to count votes, had complicated systems and deadlines, and were some of the “blue wall” swing states that got Trump into the White House in the first place.

You had to feel for Mr Gloria, the registrar in Nevada, who looked defensive and almost frightened behind his mask as he struggled before a stadium-full of media whose questions he couldn't hear because of their face-wear.

He warned that Covid resulted in an unprecedented number of mail-in ballots. They had to put them through a counting machine and then count them twice more by hand, and, dang it, they were going to take their time and get it right.

Someone mentioned paper cuts, so you have to wonder just how digitised the world really is when computers alone can't yet be trusted to count votes in the world's most online nation.

A bizarre aspect was the infrequency with which media people even mentioned Covid, even though most voters wore masks and immediately after election day the number of new US cases hit record highs.

And then there was the inaccuracy of the pre-election polls, which all cast Biden as an easy winner.

Trump convinced supporters to distrust pollsters, which touches the heart of America's biggest problem - the alienation many feel from “the system” and why they ignore the lies of a man who promised to be their champion..,but really was just his own.